

The Psychology of the Edges

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Providing top-quality project management services is a multifactor equation that involves a wide spectrum of choices. Before most of these choices, professionals must decide look, sound, and act as project managers to build credibility with clients and colleagues.

The idea was born after coming across an interesting extract from “HBR Guide to Managing Stress at Work” on the internet¹, which discussed

a project manager’s (PM’s) bitten nails as a sign of high stress levels. Indeed, the link between nail biting (“onychophagia”) and anxiety is well understood². Anxiety and stress, when present in high levels, could potentially result in poor crisis management during a project’s implementation. Nails, something so insubstantial and irrelevant to project management, could give out signals that could potentially affect a project manager’s reputation and subsequently that project manager’s company’s relationship with a prospective client.

What lies behind our choices? What do our “edges,” e.g. nails, hair, glasses, shoes, etc. signal to coworkers and clients? In the realm of project management, project managers are the product, as services are most directly provided through project managers. Thus, more than anyone else working at a project management firm, project managers are ambassadors of the company’s services.

Would you trust a project manager to manage your project if they found no time to brush their hair before work? In a fast-paced world, where we are forced to make decisions quickly, we need to be aware that every choice we make comes with an effect. Project managers must show professionalism around their edges every day in order to outwardly demonstrate their commitment to their services.

Alignment of Project Management Team’s Code of Conduct with the Company’s Culture

There is no doubt that specific levels of professionalism at work should be aligned with a company’s organizational and managerial culture. Research literature has shown that there is no official definition of professionalism in the project management industry.³ Since clothing is a basic element of a project



¹ Harvard Business Review, HBR Guide to Managing Stress at Work, January 14, 2014.

² Psychology Today, “Onychophagia (Nail Biting)”, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/intl/conditions/onychophagia-nail-biting>, accessed May 2020.

³ Professionalism & Project Management (pdf from PMI)

manager's professional business attire, should the companies establish dress codes as part of their culture⁴? If so, should such dress codes be official or unofficial?

Businesses should adopt dress codes in order to augment employees' engagement and promote professionalism. For example, managing and delivering a project on-time, within budget, and to the client's satisfaction is considered an act of professionalism. But would you trust, as a new client, your project's success to a PM that is showing up with his/her sunglasses on in the meeting? Managing one's autonomy in respect of the company's code of conduct cannot be disregarded. It seems as though acting professionally both during executing and delivering projects as well as dressing up for the occasion can be summarized as follows: PMs must look, sound, and act as PMs.⁵

Nonverbal Cues Speak Louder Than Words

Appearance is part of one's personality. Even subconsciously, we judge people from their looks. Clothes, hair style, posture are giving out nonverbal signs of our personality. It's a common assumption to consider that both the man wearing a "boardroom suit" on the subway, as well as the impeccably "business chic" dressed woman having her lunch break with colleagues, are most probably high in their company's hierarchy. It's a broad perception that professional success goes, in most cases, hand in hand with attire.⁶ When meeting a new client/coworker for the first time, there is no doubt that we have already formed an idea of that person's personality before we even exchange a few words with them.

More than 50% of someone's perception is the way we present ourselves with nonverbal cues, for example through our office outfit.⁷ In particular, project managers need to make their first impressions with clients count. They also need to be able to acknowledge, judge, and evaluate a situation before reaching a decision. All aforementioned aspects are inherent parts of the mental process called cognition, i.e. a mental activity that includes, among others, perception and decision making⁸. In this respect, PMs should primarily acknowledge that they show professionalism through delivery of services, judge and evaluate the client's expectations, and present their professional self at its best, both outfit and services-wise.

Perceived Message Effectiveness

How we perceive ourselves and how others perceive us can vary substantially. We only have control over the impression we want to give off.⁹ The way we get dressed for work is a ritual that has been formed based on simple observations. We observe how our colleagues, our clients, and our managers dress and we imitate their choices while taking into consideration our personal taste. Every choice we make sends out a message. For example, "a tie can make someone look reliable and rooted in tradition."¹⁰

⁴ Sample Dress Code Policy, <https://www.employmentlawhandbook.com/resources/sample-dress-code-policy/>, accessed July 2020

⁵ <https://opentextbc.ca/projectmanagement/chapter/chapter-6-culture-and-project-management-project-management/>

⁶ <https://hbr.org/2018/05/5-ways-to-project-confidence-in-front-of-an-audience>

⁷ <https://www.sbu.edu/docs/default-source/life-at-sbu-documents/professional-wardrobe-nbsp-.pdf?sfvrsn=0>

⁸ http://projectmanager.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2012/12/PsychologyPM_Ranganayagalu-Poonkundran.pdf

⁹ <https://www.topresume.com/career-advice/are-you-dressing-appropriately-for-work>

¹⁰ Molly St. Louis, "Research Shows That the Clothes You Wear Actually Change the Way You Perform", <https://www.inc.com/molly-reynolds/research-shows-that-the-clothes-you-wear-actually-change-the-way-you-perform.html>

If this message aligns with the company's core business and code of conduct, then a tie seems to be the right add-on for a Banker in Morgan Stanley but not for a developer working for a tech company like Google. By way of comparison, overdressing could signify poor judgement in the deployment of resources; finding no time to brush one's hair could be interpreted as sign of failure in time management; dressing up in a cocktail dress for a kickoff meeting is like suggesting to pave of a hotel's parking lot with marble. It might look great, but it is not fit for the purpose and it will usually not meet the client's standards.¹¹

Green for Optimism, Suit for Authority

A suit has a subtle connotation for authority, but as previously mentioned, the sent message can be differently interpreted depending on the receiver's perception. While showing the ultimate respect for employees' empowerment, simple common dress-for-the-occasion rules apply for all employees. Hair, nails, shoes, and clothes must be fit for the purpose of work. What happens if you had a deadline that called for late hours and you are out of suits that day? Is wearing jeans and a short-sleeved shirt at work a problem? The answer summarizes the truth of the matter in most fields: It depends on the client's judgement.¹²



Nobody has control over how a client will perceive a non-formal outfit. It could be either negative, positive, or neutral. Project managers need to calculate the risk of misperception and diminish it, where possible. Getting to know the client's preferences certainly lies on the safe side. Nevertheless, in a dynamic working environment as that of a PM company, "wardrobe agility" could be considered as an excess.

So, it seems that business-oriented, moderate attire remains on the safe side. Notwithstanding that managing risk is part of a PM's scope of services, risk-averse choices in the selection of clothing could easily be the shortcuts we are looking for.

Wear Mask and Gloves at All Times

Can a colorful shirt at work create a backlash similar to not wearing a mask in the grocery store during the COVID-19 pandemic? It actually can. Project managers need to deliver projects on-time, within budget, and with the required quality. They also need to be on-time and dressed for their purpose and place. In this way, project managers give comfort to their employer/client that they can manage themselves as efficiently as their projects.

¹¹ <https://www.shrm.org/hr-today/news/hr-news/Pages/dresstoimpress.aspx>;
<https://www.moneycrashers.com/how-to-impress-your-boss-without-sucking-up/>

¹² <https://www.jeffhavens.com/news-and-updates/dress-code-study-harvard>

In project management companies, the employees are the products, making all of them ambassadors of its services. Project managers therefore need to dress appropriately for the role they are assigned and demonstrate awareness of their duties and responsibilities both visually and verbally.

By combining the PM's "savoir faire" with a broadly accepted PM etiquette, the PMs will be able to turn the ritual of formal outfit into a worldwide trademark.¹³

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About the Author:

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About the Company:

[Hill International](#), Inc. (Hill) is an international construction consulting firm that provides program and project management, construction management, cost engineering and estimating, quality assurance, inspection, scheduling, risk management, and claims avoidance to clients involved in major construction projects worldwide. Hill has participated in over 10,000 project assignments with a total construction value of more than \$600 billion.

¹³ <https://hbr.org/2011/02/dress-for-the-job-you-want>
<https://www.pmi.org/learning/library/modern-project-manager-gantt-charts-1882>
<https://www.managementstudyguide.com/meeting-etiquette.htm>